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ABSTRACT

In dealing with racial tension and conflict, the principal is not limited to a wing and a prayer and benign neglect. The roots of conflict can be identified. Conflict can be planned for and utilized constructively. For 10 years, in approximately 2,000 instances, conciliators and mediators of the Community Relations Service have stood side-by-side with school administrators as they struggled to restore an atmosphere conducive to learning in a school that had been fractured by racial confrontation. Each case requires its own tailoring. But there is a body of techniques and methods which can be adapted and applied as needed. One approach is early diagnosis. It's strange that in the field of education, where so much of practice is the result of research and planning, problems of racial conflict are often left to chance. Once the research has been done, the principal can plan to overcome some, if not all, of the problems perceived. The search for solutions should not be limited to the boundaries of customary practice and traditional approaches. Business as usual is not likely to provide the answer. A poorly run school is a pushover for conflict. A well run school has the problem half licked. Planning and preparing to defuse or to deal with racial conflict might bring you 25 percent closer to being home free. (Author/JM)

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ADVANCE FOR RELEASE AT 2:00 P.M.
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 1975

"Dealing with Racial Conflicts in Schools"

By

Ben Holman, Director
Community Relations Service
U.S. Department of Justice

To

National Association of
Secondary School Principals

Sahara Hotel
Las Vegas, Nevada

February 10, 1975
2 p.m.

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The past two decades have brought revolutionary change to American schools as a result of rushing urbanization, massive Federal assistance programs, and the technological explosion. But perhaps the greatest change agent has been the revolution in civil rights.

Suddenly, the "underclasses" of America are demanding to be seen, heard, educated, and reckoned with. These demands have been buttressed by court decisions and public policy. These changes have brought to the schools racial desegregation, demands for improved performance, and accountability, and they have also brought conflict.

The high school principal's chair has changed from a seat of honor in a fairly placid setting to a cockpit of challenge and change. In a contentious atmosphere, he finds it increasingly difficult to avoid being cast in the role of the fall guy or the villain--at least in some people's eyes. In spite of all this, I can't think of a more important job in America today than that of the high school principal who accepts today's realities as a challenge.

What are these realities?

First, the multi-cultural school, with its wide socio-economic mix, is here to stay.

Second, society more and more will judge the educator by his failures as well as his successes, by his drop-out statistics as well as his college entrance statistics, by what happens to his Black and Chicano students as well as to his White students.

Third, the fact that school racial problems originated elsewhere does not reduce the school's responsibility to solve them.

Fourth, the multi-cultural school--just as the multi-cultural society--is seeded with the potential for conflict.

Fifth, in dealing with racial tension and conflict, the principal is not limited to a wing and a prayer and benign neglect. The roots of conflict can be identified. Conflict can be planned for and utilized constructively.

My remarks today will be addressed to this fifth reality.

For 10 years, in approximately 2,000 instances, conciliators and mediators of the Community Relations Service have stood side-by-side with school administrators as they struggled to restore an atmosphere conducive to learning in a school that had been fractured by racial confrontation.

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We have learned that there are no ready-made solutions. Each case requires its own tailoring. But there is a body of techniques and methods which can be adapted and applied as needed. And there are some general approaches which often are helpful.

One approach is early diagnosis. Let me illustrate this with a brief scenario of CRS entry into a case of school racial conflict.

Our story beings on what will forever after be known in the annals of Central High School as "Spaghetti Day." It was characterized by broken dishes, battered trays, spaghetti streamers on cafeteria walls, and spaghetti interlaced through flowing blonde hair and black afros. Also four lacerated scalps, seven arrests, and fifteen suspensions.

Late in the afternoon of Spaghetti Day, a phone rings in the regional headquarters of CRS. The call might be from the school superintendent, an NAACP board member, the mayor, the chairperson of the League of Women Voters, or a parent. CRS will then phone the principal, who--while skeptical about the need for outside assistance--will probably say, "Well, come on down. I guess it can't hurt."

The next morning, an interracial CRS team will meet initially with the principal. The team will seek his suggestions as to whom else they might want to see to make an assessment. Team members will then talk to the students involved, white and minority faculty members, guidance counselors, parents, community leaders. They will observe interactions in study halls, in cafeterias, in hallways during class changes. They'll note who uses what lavatories and exits. They'll review attendance patterns and discipline problems with the principal.

By the end of the assessment, they will have a good deal of information about the school. One thing they are likely to know for certain: Spaghetti Day--or something like it--might have been predicted. Furthermore, in the absence of change, it could happen again. The question is: What change?

At this point, the principal or superintendent is likely to initiate a diagnostic study. There will be consultation with students, parents, faculty, police, and black and white community leaders.

The findings will identify a number of problems: discipline problems; problem of fairness in implementing discipline policies; school relations with parents and the community--or the lack thereof; adequacy of communications within the school; educational motivation and the failure to overcome the alienation of the poorly achieving student; guidance practices, among others.

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After the diagnosis will come the prescription of a course of therapy: perhaps curriculum changes; perhaps revised policies on after-school activities; perhaps the establishment of bi-racial parent and student advisory councils; perhaps human relations training for faculty.

My question to you is: Why doesn't the diagnosis and the therapy take place before Spaghetti Day?

It's strange that in the field of education, where so much of practice is the result of research and planning, problems of racial conflict are often left to chance.

In school after school, where our conciliators have been called in to help reestablish an atmosphere in which learning can continue, we find that the disruption could have been reasonably foreseen and guarded against.

Let me list some of the tension-breeding factors that we have found in schools that have had trouble. The presence of several of these doesn't necessarily mean that your school will "blow." It does mean that you're running at risk.

- Impediments to minority participation in extra-curricular activities;
- Inappropriate placement of minority students in special education classes;
- Counselling practices that under-value the potential of minority students;

- Lack of minority representation in student government or in traditional leadership or high status positions;
- Overly restrictive student dress and grooming codes;
- Unequal application of disciplinary measures;
- Lack of a grievance mechanism that students--particularly minority students--feel free to use;
- Classes that are largely segregated--whether resulting from homogeneous grouping, student course selection, or other reasons;
- Self-segregation or exclusionary practices of students; and,
- Differing teacher attitudes--and even body language--toward majority and minority students--whether induced by fear, prejudice, strangeness, or over-compensation.

In conducting the diagnosis, I would urge that the principal not rely exclusively on his own administrative staff. Fresh viewpoints can be most significant. He might do well to draw heavily on the insights of his minority faculty members and counselors, on minority parents and community workers, and on majority and minority students.

Once the research has been done, the principal can plan to overcome some, if not all, of the problems perceived. Here I would like to suggest that your search for solutions not be limited to the boundaries of customary practice and traditional approaches. Business as usual is not likely to provide the answer.

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Some useful approaches to solutions--based on our observations--include the following:

- Use of bi-racial advisory councils, at all levels--students, faculty, parents, community leaders.
- Involvement of majority and minority students in review of the discipline code. Publication and class discussion of the discipline code.
- Involvement of majority and minority students in design and implementation of a student grievance mechanism.
- Special measures to assure more equitable sharing of student leadership and prestige positions.
- Provision of activity buses and other measures to encourage broader participation in extra-curricular activities.
- Review of textbooks and library materials to eliminate those which may be deprecatory to the minority, and to include those which acknowledge minority contributions.
- Continuing in-service training in human relations for faculty and staff.
- Special outreach efforts to minority parents, including meetings in minority neighborhoods.

- Greater use of minority faculty members in problem solving.

Perhaps the most important approach a principal can take in defusing racial antagonism lies in the conscious use of self.

In an area so beset by emotion--fear, anxiety, prejudice--the faculty needs the comfort and security of confident and unambiguous leadership. There should be no doubt in the mind of anyone that the principal gives high priority to the successful education of the minority child--social pathology and the failures of other institutions notwithstanding. The principal should convey the feeling that while success will come hard, his staff can achieve it, and the achievement will be worthy of a footnote in history.

Teachers should be made to feel free to come to the principal for informal counseling with respect to their own problems in this area. The faculty lounge can be a mini-laboratory for human relations learning. Faculty meetings can be the same. For openers, how about starting a conversation with something like: "I was rereading The Autobiography of Malcolm X the other day . . . ," and go on from there.

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The faculty must know that the principal expects them to have an attitude of caring for every child: the good as well as the misbehaved; the poor as well as the rich; the ungainly as well as the attractive; the inarticulate as well as the articulate; the clumsy and the well-coordinated; the slow as well as the gifted.

With staff attitudes like that, all students will know that the school cares about them, and that's when your risk of conflict begins to lower.

Let me close with a tale of two schools related by a CRS conciliator who visited a city after the schools had just been desegregated.

In School "A," every student had a program waiting for him--handwritten during the summer. In School "B," the programs had not yet been received from the computer.

In School "A," home room teachers initiated discussion on how the students felt about being in an integrated school.

In School "B," the teachers said they were afraid to open up that subject.

In School "A," hall passes were tightly controlled.

In School "B," last year's passes were lost and new ones had not arrived from the printer. Teachers wrote passes on scrap paper--soon counterfeited.

In School "A," faculty on lunchroom duty mingled, joked, and entered into discussion with students of both races.

In School "B," teachers stood with one another along the wall, fearfully regarding the new students.

In School "A," bells and public address systems worked perfectly.

In School "B," many bells and speakers had been out of order since the previous spring.

In School "A," the teachers loading buses moved with planful dispatch.

In School "B," no one was quite sure who was in charge of bus loading.

In School "A," a black and a white student had a fight; it was stopped; school went on.

In School "B," a black and a white student had a fight; then there was four; then a melee; then the school was closed.

Moral: A poorly run school is a pushover for conflict. A well run school has the problem half licked. Planning and preparing to defuse or to deal with racial conflict--the subject of this discussion--might bring you 25 percent closer to being home free.

For the last 25 percent, maybe you had still better count on prayer.

Thank you.

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